

## Consuming Landscapes: What We See When We Drive and Why It Matters

**By Thomas Zeller. Baltimore: John Hopkins Press, 2022. Pp. xi + 248. Cloth \$55.00. ISBN: 978-1421444826.**

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Road traffic is one of the great polluters in modern societies. It thus seems counterintuitive to consider roads a means of nature protection. But exactly this is the premise of Thomas Zeller's book: in the first half of the twentieth century, road-building programs and a new automobile culture aimed at reconnecting humans with nature. It is the great merit of this book to bring to the attention of readers a long-forgotten story. When automobiles emerged as an affordably artifact for the middle class at the turn of the nineteenth to the twentieth century, their meaning and uses were not yet fixed. Zeller rightfully cautions readers not to project current knowledge and insights onto past debates. He further rejects technical essentialism by emphasizing that technological features like speed or comfort did not predetermine automotive practices, but that different societal groups pursuing different goals or values made certain uses appropriate. While highways and cars have always been controversial, social, political, and economic conflicts shaped their role in society.

The book centres around the concept of "roadmindedness," an evolving set of discourses and practices that successfully promoted roads in politics, society, and culture (5). By applying this concept, Zeller is able to pin down the actors who got involved in vast road-building programs, adding a social and political component to discourse analysis. Early examples argued against rail transport as a way for individual drivers to regain their autonomy. Later, even if "roadmindedness" managed to capture the public imagination, it mainly catered to the needs of a certain segment of the population and endorsed certain professional skills. But even those subscribing to "roadmindedness" were not a homogenous group, because roads served different purposes. The main line of conflict separated utilitarian from aesthetic approaches to road building. While the first prioritized speed and unitary designs for economic benefits, the later envisioned roads that took detours and slowed drivers down, enabling them to enjoy the environment. Scenic roads were a destination in themselves that promoted automotive tourism as a way to reconcile modern infrastructure with nature. This conflict pitted civil engineers and landscape architects against each other, helping cement the latter's professional credentials.

*Consuming Landscapes* focuses on the USA and Germany, two national contexts where discourses about automobiles and the way roads should be built rose to prominence early in the twentieth century. Still, striking differences existed between the two case studies that make the comparison all the more compelling. Because of initial differences, when the USA had more automobiles and few roads, and in Germany the situation was reversed, representatives of both countries saw opportunities to learn from each other. Besides being a comparison between two different case studies, the book tells a story of multiple entanglements and exchanges, in which political leaders and experts learned from and sometimes emulated practices from the other context. By emphasizing interactions, the author is able to refute the assumption that democracies and dictatorships did not exchange ideas, even when both sides were convinced of their cultural superiority. On the contrary, people and knowledge crossed the Atlantic long after the Nazi takeover in Germany. A prominent example features Fritz Todt, the Nazi road-building czar, who referenced American parkways in his writings.

Comparing the histories of American parkways and German alpine roads further reveals some striking similarities that allegiance to different political systems helped conceal. First, in both countries scenic road building was not market driven and, in most cases, it was not economically profitable. Public investments enabled such construction. Second, although differently motivated, scenic roads were landscapes of exclusion. In Nazi Germany, efforts to build a racially defined consumer culture barred access to Jews and other minorities. In the USA, mountaineering and outdoor recreation was associated with Whiteness, making parkways inaccessible to most African-Americans. Third, in both cases, scenic routes were products of a national culture, glorifying landscapes that were framed as nationally distinctive. Parkway elevated “wilderness” to a primordial and typical American scenery, while the Alpine Roads (Deutsche Alpenstraßen) racially codified the alpine landscape of Bavaria. And fourth, both countries silenced local protest to these projects. However, while the Nazis employed drastic measures, in a democratic society like the USA protesters had many more opportunities to express their grievances.

After World War II, voices that challenged scenic road building only amplified, marking the decline of such projects. Utilitarian aspects finally gained the upper hand in road construction, which aimed at transporting people and freight in the most efficient way. Also, conservationists, who initially were lured by the ecologic potential of cars, realized that directing mass motorization over high peaks would not ensure the protection of the landscape. This lost story that Zeller captures is still relevant today. It offers a telling example of how one generation’s solution ended up being the next generation’s problem. Beautifully written and well organized, *Consuming Landscapes* operates on various scales (local, national, and international) to bring together actors and groups of different ideological strands, social belonging, and professional activity, who promoted the same cause. It ultimately reveals a paradox: although the campaign for “roadmindedness” was successful, it failed to deliver on its main promise to reconcile automotive infrastructure with nature.

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## **On a Knife Edge: How Germany Lost the First World War**

**By Holger Afflerbach. Translated by Anne Buckley and Caroline Summers. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022. Pp. xiii + 557. Hardcover \$29.95. ISBN: 978-1108832885.**

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Given the relative economic resources of Germany and its enemies, and its inefficient constitutional structures, scholars have often viewed German defeat as the likely outcome of World War I. Even the close-run offensives of summer 1914 and spring 1918 did not, on closer scrutiny, have much chance of delivering a decisive strategic advantage to Germany. Focusing on strategic decision-making, Holger Afflerbach takes issue with the interpretative schema of an almost inevitable German defeat: “This war could have ended in a draw . . . and the German leadership had to commit very serious mistakes to lose it” (6). He concludes that, from the German perspective, “catastrophic strategic mistakes” (423) hobbled the war effort. The editor of Moriz von Lyncker’s papers, Afflerbach is deeply versed in the high politics of Imperial Germany and an adept guide to the different characters,